

Secure Borders, Open Doors: The Next Step for U.S. Visas in Greece

By A/Consul General Kathryn Berck

The United States will launch a new visa process in Greece on June 14 that is part of a global effort to assure safer travel. By October 26, all visitors to the U.S. who require a visa -- tourists, students, businesspersons, and others -- will include a "finger-scan" when applying for a visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate abroad. The U.S. Embassy in Athens will begin the process for new visas issued from June 14 for most travelers between the ages of 14 and 79.

Odorless, inkless and easy to do, the finger-scan verifies the identity of the traveler at the time of entry into the United States. Our goal is to recognize terrorists, criminals, and others who represent a security risk to the United States -- before they get on the plane or cross our borders. The process of getting the visa may take a little longer, but thorough identification of such individuals ensures the safety of legitimate travelers and strengthens security for all.

Only tourists from visa-waiver countries may currently travel to the U.S. for short periods without visas. There are many categories of travel, however, that do require visas regardless of citizenship. So, whether you're a Greek tourist, a French student, a British performer or a Spanish sailor, if you need a U.S. visa, you will need a finger-scan.

Why Greece?

Like many European Union citizens, Greeks travel to the United States often and easily. The people of the U.S. and Greece have had a long tradition of travel between our two countries for tourism, business, and education. So, why is Greece included in this program? And why now -- on the eve of the 2004 Olympic Games when thousands of Americans coming to Greece will not be required to provide the same information?

The answers are both simple and complex. First of all, the biometric finger-scan includes all countries in the world. After September 11, the U.S. Congress determined it necessary to take stringent measures to protect our borders. Their goal was to insure that enemies passing as friends -- like the September 11 terrorists on U.S. student visas -- would no longer be able to use our open society to harm America. Congress mandated the inclusion of the biometric identifiers found in finger-scans in U.S. visas under the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002. The program is now known as "US-Visit."

The finger-scan process has already been implemented at about 125 U.S. embassies and consulates around the world, including those in Frankfurt, Brussels, London and

Vancouver. By the end of October, every U.S. visa issued anywhere in the world will include a finger scan, and every traveler to the U.S. with a visa will have his or her finger scanned upon arrival. Both scans will be rapidly compared. Within seconds, we will know who is asking to be let in.

Second, finger-scans are the way of the future. Unlike photographs that are easily changed or signatures that can be forged, finger-scans are nearly fraud-proof as they contain tiny biometric identifiers that cannot be altered. Since January 2004, most travelers entering the U.S. have had their two index fingers scanned, a process that takes just a few seconds. In the first two months of 2004, more than two million visitors were processed for finger-scans at U.S. air and sea ports. Some travelers were identified as attempting to enter the U.S. with false identities or altered travel documents. As a result, the use of stolen and counterfeit visas has declined.

Privacy

Some people have concerns about privacy under this program. Let me emphasize that finger-scans containing biometric identifiers collected in the visa process are available to U.S. border officials at entry points for use in verifying travelers' identities -- nothing more. Visa records are, by U.S. law, confidential. Requests for access to visa records by law enforcement agencies are subject to strict restrictions. The U.S. has no agreement to provide biometric information to any other government.

The United States is committed to what Secretary Powell has called the concept of "secure borders, open doors," by facilitating legitimate travel to the United States while maintaining the integrity and security of our borders and our nation. Every nation has the right to regulate the entry of those who would enter its borders. We believe this is the best and easiest way to maintain our homeland security, while keeping America's doors open.

Looking towards the future, I predict that Greece and all countries that value the safety of their citizens and the right of free movement will include biometric finger-scans as part of their own travel documents. With the full implementation of the US-VISIT program in Greece, I believe that Greek travelers to the U.S. will feel safer knowing that their fellow travelers are who they say they are--and not terrorists or criminals looking for an easy mark. When we say "kalo taksidi," we mean it.

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